A Brief History on the Field of Deaf Studies (1)

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Black Studies (2) and Women's Studies (3) and other cultural studies in America came into being after a certain kind of social consciousness was raised. For African-Americans, a history of oppression in America was the impetus. For women, being denied equal opportunities brought forth a new wave of feminists. The societal status as "the other" (4) was the major thrust for the birth and growth of most other cultural studies, including Chicano/a Studies and Gay and Lesbian Studies. Likewise, the field of Deaf Studies was engendered by social consciousness. However, this consciousness seems to have emerged from the discovery of the linguistic nature of American Sign Language. In 1960, with two Deaf (5) colleagues, Carl Croneberg and Dorothy Casterline, William C. Stokoe looked for a structure in sign language. As a result of this research, *Sign Language Structure* was published. In this book Stokoe proposed that, like spoken languages, signs can be broken down into parts, thereby suggesting it to be comparable to spoken languages. (6) A new name emerged: American Sign Language, or ASL. As research continued, interest grew, as evidenced by a plethora of publications (Battison, 1978; Klima and Bellugi, 1979; Liddell, 1980; Padden, 1988; Lucas, 1989; Valli and Lucas, 1992; Bahan, 1996), among many others.

Almost in tandem with the growth of ASL research was historical inquiry about Deaf people. An awareness of history imploded a social consciousness among Deaf people, suggesting that they indeed do constitute a unique minority linguistic community. Their existence is shaped by language, communicative modes, and familial, educational and career experiences. *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* was published in 1981, becoming a seminal historical text. While outdated by today's standards, it remains a classic. Many other historical texts have emerged since (Groce, 1985; Winefield, 1987; Schuchman, 1988; Van Cleve and Crouch, 1989; Maher, 1996).

With such an enlightened consciousness, it became only logical to have Deaf Studies. Educator Harvey J. Corson (1992: 8) suggests that:

....The emergence of Deaf Studies indicates the growing acceptance of the cultural study of deaf people as a legitimate scholarly pursuit, deserving of the same recognition afforded to programs such as African-American studies or women's studies.

Just like cultural studies in other areas, this field would offer opportunities to learn about famous people who were members of an oppressed minority yet overcame the odds to lead brilliant careers as leaders in a variety of fields (Bienvenu, 1992: 17). It was also seen as a vehicle to attain knowledge and understanding of organizations, athletics, festivals, and technological, business and religious services of Deaf culture and to indicate a degree of cultural solidarity (Andersson, 1992: 92).

The first formal Deaf Studies program in the United States was created in 1980 by Mr. Stephen Nover and Dr. Robert Hoffmeister at Boston University (Lane et. al., 1996). This program began with an undergraduate program for mostly hearing students that examined the lives of Deaf people from a sociological and language minority perspective, including the linguistic study of ASL. (7) In 1983 we saw the formation of the second Deaf Studies department, at the California State University, Northridge with Drs. Ray Jones and Lawrence Fleischer. (8) Lamar University in Beau-

mont, Texas began a doctoral program in Deaf Studies/Education in the early 1990s (Katz, 140). In 1994, Gallaudet University established its Deaf Studies department with Dr. Yerker Andersson. (9) The program at Gallaudet is most unique in terms of having D/deaf (10) students in the majority, which is not true at the above-mentioned universities.

The Major Issues and Debates in Deaf Studies

It would do an injustice to list all the major issues and debates in this field in an article of this size because each issue warrants discussion in book form. The fundamental issues facing the field of Deaf Studies, not necessarily in order of importance, include appropriate educational settings, self-identity as a Deaf or deaf (11) person, communicative modes, bilingualism, and biculturalism. However, for discussion here I will concentrate on two concerns: 1) a sense of "otherness" in the societal position, a common thread within various cultural studies and 2) epistemology and methodology in the field of Deaf Studies.

Just who is the "other" depends greatly on whose perspective, whose viewpoint, whose center. (12) For a long time, members of the Deaf community have been included in the categories of "handicapped," "disabled," and/or "hearing impaired." "Handicapped" is defined as a disadvantage that makes achievement unusually difficult; "disabled" suggests an incapacity due to illness or injury; and "impaired" implies defectiveness. (13) Deaf people tend to reject these labels.

Unlike physical features that usually mark minority group membership, lack of hearing cannot be seen (Stokoe, 1965: 298). The basic reason for ASL usage is that it is visually accessible, whereas spoken English, or spoken French or even spoken Japanese, for that matter, are not as readily graspable. Because the use of ASL in public arenas informs others that Deaf people are indeed present, language then becomes the most visible membership feature of this minority group. It also forms a cohesive cultural bond for the Deaf community. With language comes culture (Grosjean, 1982; Fasold, 1984; Bienvenu, 1992: 22).

ASL users dislike the "handicapped," "disabled," and/or "hearing impaired" labels because they do not see themselves as such. Even as we hurl towards the 21st century, these labels are perpetuated by others. On the other hand, many Deaf people admit to taking advantage of discounts geared for the disabled, i.e., public transportation. Their justification is that they are indeed disabled when auditory announcements are made over the loudspeakers or when TTYs are not always readily available at times of emergencies. Are we guilty of doublespeak? Or are these facilities guilty for not satisfying ADA requirements?

Epistemology and methodology for the field also merit discussion. Social scientists Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1996: 99) define epistemology as a way of exploring how we know the world, and the relationship between the inquirer and the known. Methodology focuses on how we gain knowledge about the world. Deaf Studies is interdisciplinary in nature, embracing linguistics, history, sociology, anthropology, and literature. Each of these disciplines has idiosyncratic epistemologies. For example, in sociology, symbolic interactionism links meanings to social positions, or problems; explores how people negotiate their social positions in the activities of daily production; views the society in terms of processes rather than structures; and sees how people carve out areas of autonomy despite a formal lack of power (Kleinman et al., 1994: 40).

Feminist theorist Nancy Hartsock (1983) offers that a standpoint, while not simply an interested position, posits a duality of levels of reality that reflect the relations of humans among each other and with the natural world. Following a Marxist thread, Hartsock develops the feminist and women's standpoints (1983: 285-288) which are invariably presented in any introductory Women's Studies course:

> The 'feminist standpoint' is a self-conscious perspective on self and society that arises out of a class (or gender) grouping's critical awareness of itself and its location in relation to the system it lives in. The 'women's standpoint' is the perspective that arises out of a class's or gender's received and unanalyzed engagement with its material environment, as seen through the worldview of the dominant group. (14)

Like feminists, many Deaf people assume duality in their lives. As both women and Deaf people live and study and work within the mainstream culture, both groups also possess a certain sense of affinity amongst themselves. While socioeconomic status and ethnic backgrounds vary tremendously, there is a common group identity (Parasnis, 1996: 13). For women, their commonality is tied to their gender. For Deaf people, the commonality lies in language rather than being unable to hear. Another dual experience shared by both women and Deaf people is a history of social discrimination based on presumptions held by the mainstream culture, such as lower intellectual skills.

The Deaf consciousness needs to be defined. Can we begin to say that the Deaf consciousness is a perspective on self and society that arises out of a minority language grouping's critical awareness of itself and in relation to the system that it lives in? However before doing so, substantial research in this direction is needed.

Most current readings in this field resemble cultural reportage (Stacey, 1988: 24) rather than cultural construction. Charles Katz (1995), a doctoral student at Lamar University, writes that we are witnessing a proliferation of historical, cultural and linguistic studies of the Deaf community and its people. The shift is now from a communal perspective, bringing forth a new understanding of Deaf people. For example, Padden and Humphries' *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (1988) was one of the earliest suggestions of an anomaly in the literature about Deaf people. For much too long, literature was limited to the fact of their condition—cannot hear—and to other facts that suggested negative results of this condition.

In their introduction, Padden and Humphries (1988: 1) say that they want to portray the lives Deaf people share, their myths, and the lessons they teach one another: interesting facets that have been long obscured by previous pathological views. Most of the anecdotes in this book were orally transmitted. A more recent book by Parasnis (1996), *Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience*, moves somewhat beyond cultural reportage as it includes a section on self-reflexive essays written by Deaf people themselves. Their own stories, reflecting the diversity of the experiences, feelings and perceptions within the Deaf community, are rarely showcased in most traditional academic writings about Deaf people (Parasnis, 1996: 16).

Now what?

The field of Deaf Studies is still in its infancy. The link between methodology and epistemology engenders a body of knowledge, or theories about what is thought and known about a subject or an issue. When most cultural studies began, they moved from initial acceptance to justification for their existence. Likewise, the struggle for justification is just beginning for Deaf Studies. With the paradigm shift which sees deafness as a diversity issue, there is a need for fresh ideas for teaching, learning and research. As it continues to grow, I praise the recent move towards what resembles ethnography. However, there is still a need to move beyond cultural reportage. Almost all of the ethnographies about Deaf people are written by hearing people, whereas feminist ethnographies are about and by women themselves. (15) Deaf people need to be encouraged to do research: the field of Deaf Studies would be the best vehicle for such encouragement to move into this direction.

Endnotes

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2. For an historical overview of Black Studies, see Karenga (1993).

3. For historical overviews of Women's Studies, see Lerner (1993) and Tobias (1997).

4. Feminist Joan W. Scott (1992) suggests that personal experience can serve as a bedrock of evidence to explore differences to understand the mechanisms of oppression. Also see Spivak (1987).

5. I adopt the use of 'Deaf' to refer to social collectiveness and attitudes, and the use of 'deaf' to refer to the audiological condition, a distinction made by Woodward (1972) and further supported by Padden and Humphries (1988).

6. For further information about Stokoe, see Baker and Battison (1980), Sacks (1989), and Maher (1996).

7. Bob Hoffmeister: E-mail communique, January 30, 1996.

8. In the academic 1975-76 year, the idea of a sign language program was discussed between Dr. Ray Jones and Dr. Lawrence Fleischer at the California State University, Northridge but it was not until 1983 that this was approved and established, however, using the name of Deaf Studies instead of Sign Language (E-Mail communique, Charles N. Katz, March 3, 1998).

9. Upon Dr. Andersson's retirement in 1996, Dr. Ben Bahan has assumed the chair.

10. The use of a combination of 'D/d' signifies both culturally Deaf and audiologically deaf people.

11. Refer to Endnote #4. A Deaf person is usually one who may have one or more of the following features: Deaf parents; educated in a residential school for the deaf; user of ASL; and identifies the self as a culturally Deaf person. On the other hand, a deaf person is one who resists the use of ASL and does not identify with the norms of the Deaf community and culture.

12. Padden and Humphries (1988) write that every culture has a center, a way the people who constitute a culture see themselves and the world in general. For Deaf people, the center is visually-based that grew from ASL.

13. Definitions for 'handicapped,' 'disabled' and 'impaired' are derived from the Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition.

14. As posited in Frankenberg (1993: 265).

15. A list of ethnographies about Deaf people can be found in Foster (1996).

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